

Northern Solidarity

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Introduction

This paper was prepared from notes of a presentation given to Project North Vancouver during the last of a series of three discussions. The topic of the last evening was Northern Solidarity- Is It Possible?

At the time this paper was written and the discussion held we had not seen a copy of the working paper on Project North.

The paper does not represent the views of the Project North Vancouver.

Northern Solidarity

The topic before us this evening is whether or not it is possible to show our solidarity with northern peoples struggle for self-determination and in particular whether or not it is possible for the Vancouver Committee of Project North to play a part in undertaking this important task.

I am not going to answer that question, it properly belongs to all of us to sort out and decide. However I am going to attempt to outline what solidarity means for me as someone from the south and perhaps give some directions for possible work in the future.

To begin then, it is my premise that solidarity can only be successful if it stems from an analysis of the nature of power in our society and a commitment on the part of us to change that in radical ways. From this position we can begin to talk about our desire to show solidarity with the north and how that relates to change in the south.

We must be clear then on what solidarity means and why it is different from another concept we have ~~which is~~ which is "support work".

Support work for me really means a group of people in the south have gotten together to "support" the struggle of northern peoples to end a particular form of oppression and injustice in their homeland. It does not suggest that there is anything fundamentally wrong with the system that causes the injustice.

On the contrary, it assumes that the system is okay except for this problem in the north. It reflects the kind of paternalism that the people of the north have correctly analyzed as colonialism in operation.

Secondly it also creates a weakness in our work because we are never part of a process that develops a clear analysis of the system as a whole and thus we are not able to articulate the effect of the struggle for self-determination in the north will have on us in the south.

Thirdly it does not allow us to explore the common themes of the struggle in the north and the south and how those can fit together in a common strategy.

Solidarity on the other hand demands that for us to act responsibly we must have a clear understanding of the structural blocks which face not only the northern people but those of us in the south looking for some form of self-determination for ourselves and our people.

It asks the participants to go beyond the feeling that we are supporting an isolated struggle to correct an injustice but are part of the struggle which is basic to our own human development and liberation.

Solidarity also means that we are in a constant process of evaluation on where our common interests are so that unity can be strengthened. This has to be approached both philosophically and tactically.

For example the best philosophical approach to the development of capital intensive resource projects maybe

experience is reason enough to reject them. However in the south we have other options to expand this opposition amongst southern Canadians according to our interests.

Although not enough work has been done in this area there is an emerging theme that these projects distort the economy, centralize more wealth and power into fewer and fewer hands, destroy long term jobs in the south, take money away from social programs and tie us more and more into the United States.

Both scenarios are crucial to our work. What is open to discussion is how to approach these two experiences and take action on them.

In summary solidarity means we build alliances with people in the north based on our common need for freedom and liberation. Support work means we offer our help in limited ways, but also more important, we offer only a small part of ourselves and our experiences which ultimately is of little use to either northern or southern people in meeting the enormous challenges ahead.

The struggle for liberation in the north has seen a number of allies in the last 15 years. Few have managed to go beyond the short sighted view of support to a deeper view of solidarity.

For me the struggle developed in the sixties because of two major factors. The first was the threat by the major trans-national oil companies to construct the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline. The second was the development of aboriginal people into more concrete organizations which we in the south could more easily deal with.

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At that time in the south two major positions developed around northern development and land claims. The first was held by environmental groups who opposed the development of the pipeline on primarily environmental grounds. The second and larger group by far opposed the pipeline because of land claims and native rights.

Both these groups came together to support the demand of no pipeline for 10 years which would allow the "land claims question" to be settled and give aboriginal people time to develop their own institutions and economy.

It was the moratorium position that found support in the churches, labour organizations and support committees across the country.

These groups found some political power through this demand and the decision of the National Energy Board to not allow the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline to be constructed. Instead they supported the construction of the Alaska Highway Pipeline. ~~in 1973~~ The proposal was put forward by Bob Blair and Foothills Pipeline (Blair also proposed that no pipeline should be built in the NWT until the land claims question was settled)

While this decision can be seen as a victory on one-hand and a sign of strength, it also revealed a weakness in our work.

The Alaska Highway Pipeline represented the same threat to the aboriginal rights of Yukon and B.C. people that the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline represented to the DENE and Inuit of the NWT.

The Alaska Highway line also represented the same type of development the Mackenzie Valley line represented in terms of capital investment and its effect on the south.

However what is clear is that the opposition to the Mackenzie Valley line did not go directly over to the other pipeline, instead some people even supported the line.

The environmentalists were quoted as saying they supported the Alaska line because it would have 'less' environmental effects. The labour unions have supported the Lysyk report and have not voiced opposition to the line since it was announced.

It left all of us feeling a little bit defeated and unsure if it was still possible to build solid opposition to the line if it was already approved.

Meanwhile the Dene and others began to articulate (at least in the south it seemed this way] not a land claims position but a position for self-determination and aboriginal nationhood. According to them it meant a whole new political relationship with the government of the south. This brought quick denouncement from the federal government who also got rid of Allmond as Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

They let us know that it wasn't support against the construction of a project they wanted it was support against a whole system that was preventing self-determination in the north.

In an interview with George Erasmus of the Dene Nation, he outlined this need for solidarity around the issue of self-determination and who they expected to get this solidarity from.

Energy File: So who do you get help from? There were a lot of people who supported you against the pipeline, churches labour unions. Now that focus seems to be gone, what kind of focus do you see now for people in the south to give support to you. Self-determination?

Erasmus: Yes, very much so. The struggle will go on long after you and I are gone. We do what we can while we're alive, the battle is the important thing, that's what life is all about, to continue to evolve to a situation where you're bettering your own society, where your own humanity can come forth and the humanity of other people in your society.

The allies that we see and work with are those in the church, union leaders, other native leaders in the south, leaders of the youth in the south, leaders of different kinds of citizen movements in the south. We believe there will be new allies as the work we're involved in takes a shape and form people in the south will be able to see something in common with.

We want formal recognition. We want the possibility of creating a new society up here. The kind of society we are talking about is going to have an effect on the rest of Canada. The people we see as long term allies in this process are people in other parts of our society, in other institutions that are also attempting to make radical change, long term change, to become more responsible individuals, a society that is more controlled by its citizenship.

Energy File: Where do you see these people right now, George? There's an incredible backlash in the churches right now against these people. I guess its in the country now and we're all facing those kinds of things.

Erasmus: It's to be expected. What do you expect when you have all those years of an incredibly authoritarian church? You don't expect change overnight. It's going to be a process which could fail if more people don't get involved.

We're talking about radical change in the very fabric of our society. That's not going to happen over

night and there's going to be backlash. We're talking about completely changing people's ways of living. People are going to turn around and question it. Nobody with any sense of responsibility will stand by and see major changes in institutions that affect him greatly or to some extent without being involved, without questioning it,

without seeing that the change will advance his relationship with other people in a material sense or in a sense of more positive human growth.

If there are going to be dramatic changes in the church structure, if there is to be general support I think it would come when people see the changes will help them become more progressive in their own humanity.

It is one thing for the people of the north for to say that their "long term allies in this process are in other parts of society, in other institutions that are also attempting to make radical change, long term change..." it is quite another for them to define for us what those changes could and should be. It is not their responsibility, no more than it is ours to determine their

long term road to self determination.

Between those two groups, in the north and the south who are fighting for long term radical change there are many ideas and tactical things to be shared. This, even if it is in the form of constructive criticism can only serve to make us both stronger. For us in particular the advantage we have in being in contact with the north should be shared with others in the south.

This brings us directly to face the question of who our allies are in the south in carrying out the work to bring long-term radical change to this society and how we can develop stronger solidarity with the people in the north at the same time.

Perhaps the most logically place to look for this in our situation is to other organizations within the church who are working on other issues such as womens rights, nuclear power and safe energy, third world issues, etc. It is within this progressive element of the church where you will also find people who are trying to develop long term political strategies for change in Canada. Communications between these groups must be extended and deepened at the local level as well as the national level.

Outside the churches we must also look for allies at the grassroots of other organizations who would be willing to share their experiences with us. Unlike the Moratorium Conference held in Vancouver a few years ago we need to put our emphasis on the grassroots because the leaders of the unions, native organizations and churches cannot make the commitment

commitment to carry out work if there is not a strong lobby or demand from their members. This was the case following the moratorium conference.

With these groups both inside and outside the churches we must work to bring together a set of goals that do not speak to one issue but to all of them in some way. This would make our activity in the south stronger and find a broader base to mobilize when it is important to do that.

For our part a major contribution to this widening of our political base would be to intensify our commitment to understanding the role of capital intensive projects on the people of the south. This work has already brought us into conflict with the basic values of the capitalist economy and those who run it. We must accept that this will happen and be prepared with good solid information to deal with the arguments and attacks of those who oppose our thoughts and actions.

In British Columbia the issue of uranium mining is one in which many thousands are involved and one which ties directly to the north. We would find many allies there who would contribute to our understanding of development in the south and who would be interested in our analysis of northern development and the struggle of aboriginal peoples.

We must also get involved in planning for more creative actions in the south which appeal to many people on different levels. The use of humour in our work and actions should be considered. Direct action that puts us in open conflict with those trying to develop the north with pipelines etc should be considered. For instance putting up an informational picket at the storage site of the pipe in the south would draw attention to the issue. Making an offer to give the corporations in the United States 10 million dollars if they will leave us alone because it would be cheaper in the long run than letting them develop mines in the north. These are just a couple of thoughts to try and give an example of the type of action we might consider. The main thrust of these actions would be to bring people together to do something as a group and not letter writing campaigns and visits to local MPS which are usually done as individuals.

It might seem that I have left aboriginal rights out of this. I haven't and firmly believe that it represents the underlying right to self-determination in the north and must be part, a major part, of our work in the south. We must learn to relate the concept more meaningfully to people in the south who have an interest in it because of their own need and desire for self determination. This rules out working with corporations, some elements of the church, some sectors of the labour movement, and others who have no interest in a radically different society. It does not mean that all the rest will support the idea, only that objectively

they are seen to have an interest that does not conflict with the principles of self-determination. It must be clear that those who do not have an interest that supports self-determination for people in the south are not the allies of people in the north who are fighting for self-determination. To suggest they are is misleading at best and down right dangerous at worst.

I would like to return to the beginning of this presentation and say that yes it is possible to build solidarity with the people of the north. As a matter of fact, for those of us in the south involved in the struggle here it is not a question of whether we believe in aboriginal rights, but whether we believe in the right to self determination of all people. If we do it is not a choice of whether to show solidarity, but a principle of our belief.

In conclusion I want to say in the time ahead that we face many more years of hard work and activity. I hope that this paper contributes to this process of work and sorting out of our future directions. I hope it is taken in the spirit it was given, which was solidarity and hope.

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